The gruelling search for Gaza's dead under the rubble

GAZA CITY: Standing beside the mound of rubble that was once his home, Ahmed Salim cannot hold back the tears as he struggles to retrieve the bodies of loved ones trapped underneath tonnes of debris.

Over 30 people were killed when his home was struck, he recalled, among them "my wife, my children, my mother, my father".

"I'm the only one who survived," he said, pointing to the pile of broken concrete and twisted metal that was once a five-storey building in Gaza City's Zeitoun neighbourhood.

The building was destroyed on Dec 24 last year and he has been waiting ever since to retrieve their bodies and give them a proper burial.

"The only thing that matters to me is to be able to bury them," the 43-year-old said. Thousands of other Palestinians are in a similar situation.

According to UN data, the Israeli military had damaged or destroyed around 83 per cent of the buildings in Gaza that stood before the conflict started in Oct 2023.

The densely-populated Palestinian territory is covered in 61.5 million tonnes of debris: nearly 170 times the weight of New York City's Empire State Building.

Mahmud Bassal, spokesman for Gaza's civil defence agency, estimates that about 10,000 bodies are buried under the rubble.

"We cannot extract thousands of bodies without heavy machinery. We need the means to lift the roofs and the tonnes of cement," said Bassal, whose organisation conducts search and rescue operations in Gaza.

'Help me retrieve them'

Iyad Rayan holds out the same hope as Salim: burying his wife and children with dignity.

"My wife, my son Samir and my daughter Lana are still here under the rubble," he said by the wreckage of his Gaza City home, which he said was destroyed in early October this year.

"I want to send an appeal to the whole world: help me retrieve them," the 55-year-old said.

Amal Abdel Aal is waiting for heavy equipment to enter the Gaza Strip so the bodies of her son and brother can be recovered.

They have been under the rubble in the Sabra neighbourhood of Gaza City since the early days of the two-year conflict.

"They never leave my thoughts. My heart aches at the thought of dogs reaching their bodies and eating them," said the 57-year-old woman now living in southern Gaza, where hundreds of thousands of people have sought shelter.

"I will only find relief when I have buried them, even if only a single bone remains."

After the ceasefire began on Oct 10, Israel allowed Egyptian bulldozers to enter Gaza to help recover the remains of prisoners, to be returned under the US-brokered truce deal.

"The world is unfair. We see bulldozers digging to retrieve the Israeli prisoners, while no one cares about the thousands of our martyrs," said Abdel Aal.

Sadness, loss and pain

Since the ceasefire, Palestinians have been able to recover around 500 bodies in areas that emergency workers could access following the partial withdrawal of Israeli forces, Bassal said.

The halt in fighting allowed Amer Abu al Tarabish to return to Beit Lahia in northern Gaza, he said, to extract the bodies of his parents from the ruins of their family home "with my bare hands".

"My parents, my brother and his children, his wife, my uncle, his wife and their children... Thirty people remained under the rubble for more than a year," he said.

"I pulled out their bodies intact; they were not decomposed," he recounted, adding that he was "overwhelmed by sadness, loss and pain".

"I was able to bring them out one by one, say goodbye to them, and imprint their faces in my memory before burying them."

For other Gaza residents, even this small consolation may never come.

Bassal noted that thousands of people had been reported missing, especially during major population displacements as the fighting shifted.

"We don't know whether they were killed or arrested" by Israeli forces, he said.

As for families who buried their loved ones hastily during the conflict, many consider those graves to be temporary, or feel that proper rites have not yet been observed.

Mohammed Naim, 47, said his family had to bury 43 relatives in just seven graves.

"We placed the remains of each family in a single grave," he said.

"But we swore over their graves that we would exhume them and rebury them, with dignity, in Gaza City."—AFP

Vietnam's beauty queen gets two years jail for fibre gummy fraud

HANOI: A court in Vietnam sentenced a former beauty queen to two years in jail on Wednesday for falsely promoting gummies as rich in fibre on her social media channels, state media reported.

The judges found Nguyen Thuc Thuy Tien guilty of deceiving customers, saying she was aware the fibre content of the candy was low at just 0.935 percent, *VnExpress* reported.

A former winner of the Thailand-based Miss Grand International beauty competition, Tien received a certificate of merit from Vietnam's prime minister.

She promoted Kera Supergreens Gummies along with fellow social media influencers Pham Quang Linh and Hang Du Muc, both of whom also received two-year sentences.

"They committed the offense intentionally and gained a large illicit profit, so strict punishment is necessary," the court said of Tien and her co-defendants, according to *VnExpress*.

The court said Kera Supergreens Gummies was a joint venture between Tien and a company set up by the two other influencers, with Tien holding a 30 percent stake.

Last December, Tien promoted the product with the other two as a healthy candy containing the equivalent of a plate of vegetables per gummy.

Investigators said the gummies contained more than 30 percent sorbitol, an artificial sweetener with laxative effects, along with undisclosed additives.

The court said more than 129,000 packs had been sold to over 56,000 customers for more than $650,000, with the three influencers netting a $473,000 profit.

Tien gained popularity in Vietnam after winning the Bangkok beauty pageant in 2021 and received advertisement deals with brands.—AFP

Israeli strikes hit Lebanon after evacuation warnings

BEIRUT: The Israeli military said it struck Hezbollah 'weapons storage facilities' in several south Lebanon towns on Wednesday, and accused the group of rebuilding its capabilities close to the border.

The Israeli military has kept up frequent air strikes in Lebanon in spite of a ceasefire sealed last November that sought to end more than a year of hostilities.

The latest raids came a day after 13 people were killed in an Israeli strike on a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, the deadliest attack since the truce came into effect.

Israel's military claimed that it had struck "several weapons storage facilities belonging to Hezbollah's rocket unit in southern Lebanon", calling such sites "a violation of the understandings between Israel and Lebanon".

It had previously warned residents to evacuate the area around sites in the southern Lebanese towns of Deir Kifa, Shehur, Ainata and Tayr Felsay.

Lebanon's official National News Agency (NNA) later said raids hit all four locations.

In Deir Kifa, Lebanese soldiers deployed near the targeted building, which collapsed after the strike. Freballs and smoke erupted after the raid.

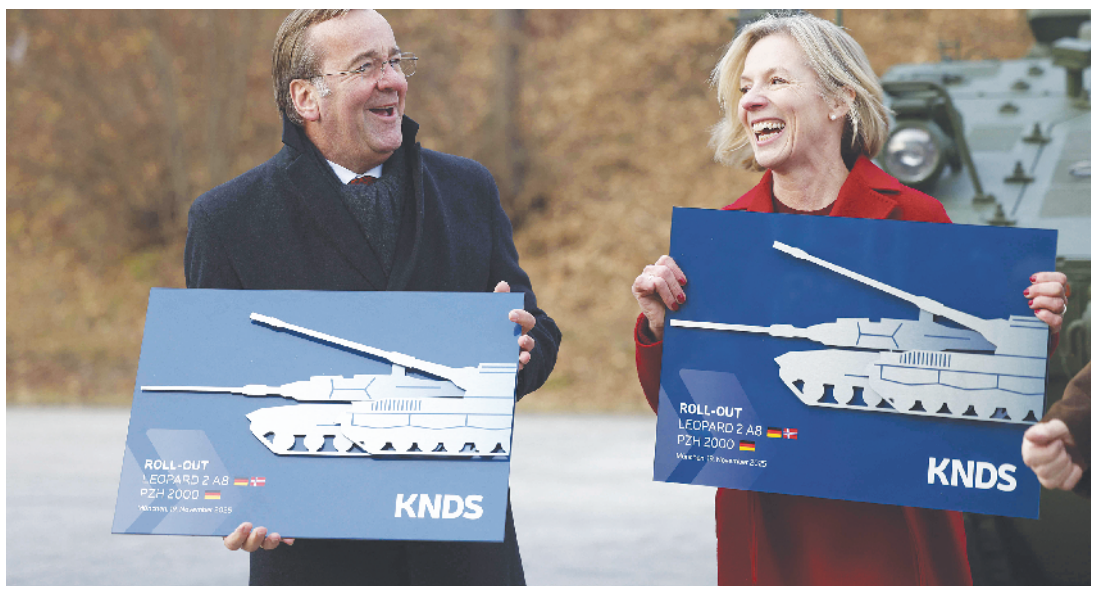
In its evacuation warnings on *X*, the Israeli military had said it would strike Hezbollah "military infrastructure... in response to Hezbollah's prohibited attempts to rebuild its activities in the area".

In a subsequent statement, the military singled out the town of Beit Lif, just a few kilometres from the Israeli border.

It accused Hezbollah of rebuilding "dozens of infrastructure sites in the area of the village, including headquarters and weapons storage facilities", some inside civilian homes.

Lebanon says Israel is violating the truce with its strikes, and by maintaining troops in five areas of the country's south.

Under heavy US pressure and fears of expanded Israeli attacks, Lebanon has committed to disarming Hezbollah, but the group has rejected the idea of handing over its weapons.—AFP



GERMAN Defence Minister Boris Pistorius (left) and Marte Gerhardsen, a Norwegian official, hold a board about the Leopard tank during a trial in Munich, southern Germany.—AFP

Eyeing Russia, EU targets barriers to moving military eastward

BRUSSELS: The EU on Wednesday took aim at the red tape and bottlenecks hampering the movement of tanks and troops across the continent as fears grow that conflict could one day erupt with Russia.

A European official summed up the challenge: how do you ensure a column of tanks stationed in Spain "doesn't reach Poland after the war "? For now, that is far from guaranteed.

Tanks and other heavy equipment currently require country-by-country authorisations to transit through European Union territory. Even with permits, convoys often have to take lengthy detours to avoid roads or bridges too weak to bear their weight.

"The fast movement of Europe's militaries is essential for European defence," EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas said. "We have to ensure that forces can be in the right place and at the right time."

With Europe racing to build its defences since Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, EU auditors warned this year that moving troops and weapons across the 27-nation bloc remained "problematic" and that it was unclear "who does what".

The European Court of Auditors called governance arrangements for military mobility in the EU "complex and fragmented" -- noting for instance that tanks from one country cannot move through another if they are heavier than road traffic regulations allow.

One telling example: France encountered difficulties in 2022 transporting tanks to Romania after Germany said the heavy equipment could not travel by road. Officials had to charter trains.

Around 500 key choke points have been identified along potential corridors for troop movements through Europe in the event of war, as part of the commission's plan.

Most need urgent upgrades to bring about the kind of mobility that has become a priority since Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Underscoring the need to act, EU defence commissioner Andrius Kubilius quoted the commander of US forces in Europe during World War I, General John J. Pershing, who famously declared: "Infantry wins battles; logistics wins wars."

Stress tests

To tackle bottlenecks, the commission is proposing a single permit valid across the EU, replacing the current patchwork of authorisations — some of which must be requested 45 days in advance.

In emergencies, Brussels also wants clear rules for priority passage to avoid delays.

A so-called solidarity mechanism pooling national dual-use defence resources such as trucks for rapid access is also foreseen. Kubilius said the EU plans marked a "substantial step forward."

To make sure the system works, the commission said regular "stress tests" would be carried out to check whether infrastructure can handle heavy military traffic.

Awareness of the problem is not new: NATO has been fretting about it for years and the commission has already launched two action plans, the latest in November 2022, which got a lacklustre reception from the Court of Auditors.

Brussels wants to earmark 17 billion euros ($19.7 billion) between 2028 and 2034 to boost military mobility -- 10 times more than under its previous long-term budget.

The commission also on Wednesday unveiled moves to bring Europe's defence industry closer to emerging technologies — from artificial intelligence to quantum computing and space systems.

While arms manufacturers already use these tools extensively, Brussels wants to encourage joint projects and is pushing in particular for the bloc's emerging "AI factories" aimed at testing artificial intelligence solutions to be opened to defence firms.—AFP

Neanderthals and ancient apes locked lips: study

LONDON: Scientists have found evidence suggesting that kissing dates back up to 21 million years and that our ape ancestors and Neanderthals likely locked lips, research published on Wednesday said.

Kissing has long presented an evolutionary puzzle to scientists, as it appears to carry high risks, such as disease transmission, while having no obvious reproductive or survival advantages.

However, the new study found that the practice has evolved over millions of years, and that our extinct human relatives, the Neanderthals, may have shared a peck to stay warm during the ice age.

The research led by scientists at the University of Oxford was published in the journal *Evolution and Human Behaviour*.

"This is the first time anyone has taken a broad evolutionary lens to examine kissing," said co-author Matilda Brindle, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Oxford.

"Our findings add to a growing body of work highlighting the remarkable diversity of sexual behaviours exhibited by our primate cousins." For the study, researchers defined kissing as a "non-aggressive, mouth-to-mouth contact that did not involve food transfer".

"The results indicate that kissing is an ancient trait in the large apes," evolving in primate ancestors from 17 to 21 million years ago, according to an Oxford University statement.

"Kissing was retained over the course of evolution and is still present in most of the large apes," it added.

The researchers first collected data about modern primates that have been observed kissing, including chimpanzees, bonobos, and orangutans.

Then, treating kissing as a "trait", they mapped it to the family tree of primates. By stimulating different evolutionary scenarios, they estimated the probability that ancient ancestors also engaged in kissing.

Previous studies have found that humans and Neanderthals had shared oral microbes through saliva transfer, suggesting that the species had kissed each other.—AFP

Syrian activist wins Children's Peace Prize

BANA al Abed, winner of the International Children's Peace Prize.—AFP

STOCKHOLM: A 16-year-old Syrian girl who caught the world's attention as a seven-year-old tweeting from the siege of Aleppo won the KidsRights Prize on Wednesday for her advocacy for children affected by war.

Bana al Abed, who was evacuated to Turkiye in 2016 with her family, was awarded the International Children's Peace Prize for her work, "Reuniting families, reopening schools and offering tangible hope to children in conflict zones like Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine and Syria", the KidsRights Foundation said.

"With a voice that knows no fear, I ask (ex-Syrian president) Bashar al Assad, (Israeli Prime Minister) Benjamin Netanyahu, (Russian President) Vladimir Putin, the Sudanese warlords, and all the other warlords across the globe: How many children have had their lives and dreams stolen by wars, by a regime that kills its citizens, in the name of survival by a criminal who markets war as a political agenda, by an empire that justifies aggression in the name of security, and by those who have turned violence into a deliberate policy?" Al Abed said in her acceptance speech at Stockholm City Hall.—AFP

480 events planned to mark Franco's death

MADRID: Spain's leftist government on Wednesday announced 480 new events to be held this year to mark the 50th anniversary of the death of right-wing dictator Francisco Franco and the restoration of democracy.

The series of concerts, conferences, exhibitions, and other initiatives will follow the more than 150 events already held so far this year across the country under the slogan "Spain at Liberty".

Franco died on November 20, 1975, aged 82, after ruling Spain with an iron fist for nearly four decades.

Democratic elections followed in 1977, and newly enfranchised Spaniards approved a new constitution in a referendum the following year, now celebrated with a public holiday on December 6.

Democratic Memory Minister Angel Victor Torres said the government had opted against holding a "central act" on Thursday to mark the anniversary of Franco's death in favour of "celebrating the recovery of democracy throughout the year". "We are not celebrating the death of the dictator, we are celebrating the beginning of the end" of the dictatorship, he said.The commemorative events aim to highlight Spain's economic, social, and political transformation, as well as pay tribute to those who fought for it.—AFP

Air India seeks China airspace access as Pakistan ban bites

• Airline hit by 29pc fuel cost surge, long-haul flights now up to three hours longer • Govt reviewing plea to diplomatically ask Beijing to allow alternative routing

NEW DELHI: Air India is lobbying the Indian government to convince China to let it use a sensitive military airspace zone in Xinjiang to shorten routes as the financial toll from a ban on Indian carriers flying over Pakistan mounts, a company document shows.

The unusual request comes just weeks after direct India-China flights resumed after a five-year hiatus following a Himalayan border clash between the nations.

Air India has been seeking to rebuild its reputation and international network after a London-bound Boeing 787 Dreamliner crashed in Gujarat in June, killing 260 people and forcing it to briefly cut flights for safety checks.

But that effort is being complicated by the closure of Pakistan airspace to Indian carriers since their diplomatic tensions erupted in late April.

For Air India, the country's only carrier with a major international network, fuel costs have risen by as much as 29 per cent and journey times by up to three hours on some long-haul routes, according to the previously unreported document submitted to Indian officials in late October and reviewed by *Reuters*.

The Indian government is reviewing Air India's plea to diplomatically ask China to allow an alternative routing and emergency access to airports in case of diversions at Hotan, Kashgar and Urumqi in Xinjiang, aiming to reach US, Canada and Europe faster, the document said.

"Air India's long-haul network is under severe operational and financial strain ... Securing Hotan route will be a strategic option," it added.

The airline, owned by Tata Group and Singapore Airlines, estimated the Pakistan airspace closure's impact on its profit before tax at $455 million annually — a significant amount given its fiscal 2024-25 loss stood at $439m.

The Chinese foreign ministry said it was not aware of the situation and referred *Reuters* to the "relevant authorities".

Air India and civil aviation authorities in India, China and Pakistan did not respond to *Reuters*' queries.

'Unviable' routes

The Chinese airspace Air India is seeking to access is ringed by some of the world's highest mountains of 20,000ft (6,100m) or more, and is avoided by international airlines due to potential safety risks in case of a decompression incident.

More critically, it also falls within People's Liberation Army's Western Theater Command, which is equipped with extensive missile, drone and air-defence assets and shares some airports with civilian aircraft, military analysts say.

The Pentagon's December report on China's military said the command's responsibilities include responding to any conflict with India.

Open-source intelligence tracker Damien Symon said China's military has recently expanded an airbase at Hotan.

Data from AirNav Radar shows no non-Chinese airlines departed or arrived at Hotan airport in the last 12 months.

Airspace globally has been constricted due to proliferating conflict zones.

US carriers have been banned from flying over Russia since the Ukraine war began in 2022 and pulled out of many US-India routes. That gave Air India a near-monopoly on non-stop flights from India.

But after the Pakistan airspace closure, Air India's Delhi-Washington route was suspended in August. Now other routes are under review, with the direct Mumbai- and Bengaluru to San Francisco routes "becoming unviable" due to an additional three hours of travel time, including a technical stop in Kolkata, the document said.

A flight from San Francisco to Mumbai on Lufthansa via Munich is now only five minutes longer than on Air India.

"Passengers (are) shifting to foreign carriers due to shorter flight time as they have the benefit of Pakistan overflight," the document said.

Air India estimates the requested Hotan route in China could substantially cut extra fuel requirements and flight times, help restore passenger and cargo capacity it trimmed by as much as 15pc on routes like New York- and Vancouver-Delhi, and reduce losses by an estimated $1.13 million per week.

With no signs of airspace ban easing, Air India also wants "temporary subsidy till Pakistan airspace opens", the document said.—Reuters